

grandparents and great-grandparents who spoke very little English, who instead spoke mostly Polish, Italian, German, or Swedish — the language of the country they grew up in.

In sum, bilingualism isn't a danger either to the English language or to the bilingual speakers themselves. On the contrary, there are many advantages to bilingualism, both for the individual and for the society as a whole. English enjoys tremendous dominance in the U.S. and in the world.

But if history is any indication, there will always be people in the U.S. who cannot speak English — and they will have grandchildren who do.

For further information

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The Society holds its Annual Meeting in early January each year and publishes a quarterly journal, LANGUAGE and the LSA Bulletin. Among its special education activities are the Linguistic Institutes held every other summer in odd-numbered years and co-sponsored by a host university.

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Bilingualism

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What does it mean to say somebody is bilingual?

A bilingual person is someone who speaks two languages. A person who speaks more than two languages is called 'multilingual' (although the term 'bilingualism' can be used for both situations). Multilingualism isn't unusual; in fact, it's the norm for most of the world's societies. It's possible for a person to know and use three, four, or even more languages fluently.

How do people become bilingual?

People may become bilingual either by acquiring two languages at the same time in childhood or by learning a second language sometime after acquiring their first language.

Many bilingual people grow up speaking two languages. Often in America such people are the children of immigrants; these children grow up speaking their parents' native language in their childhood home while speaking English at school. Many bilinguals, however, are not immigrants; it is not uncommon for people born in the U.S. to speak English at school or work and another language at home. Children can also become bilingual if their parents speak more than one language to them, or if some other significant person in their life (such as a grandparent or caretaker) speaks to them consistently in another language. Sometimes a child will grow up in a household in which each parent speaks a different language; in that case, the child may learn to speak to each parent in that parent's language. In short, a young child who is regularly exposed to two languages from an early age will most likely become a fluent native speaker of both languages. The exposure must involve interaction; a child growing up in an English-speaking household who is exposed to Spanish only through Spanish-language television won't become a Spanish-English bilingual, but a child who is regularly spoken to in both English and Spanish will.

It is also possible to learn a second language sometime after early childhood, but the older you get, the harder it is to learn to speak a new language as well as a native speaker. Many linguists believe there is a 'critical period' (lasting roughly from birth until puberty)

during which a child can easily acquire any language that he or she is regularly exposed to. Under this view, the structure of the brain changes at puberty, and after that it becomes harder to learn a new language. This means that it is much easier to learn a second language during childhood than as an adult.

In some countries, nearly everybody is bilingual or multilingual. In parts of India, for example, a small child usually knows several languages. In many European countries, children are encouraged to learn a second language — typically English. In fact, the U.S. is quite unusual among the countries of the world in that many of its citizens speak only English, and they are rarely encouraged to become fluent in any other language.

Is it harder for a child to acquire two languages at once?

There is no evidence to suggest that it's any harder for a child to acquire two languages than it is for the child to acquire one language. As long as people are regularly speaking with the child in both languages, the child will acquire them both easily. A child doesn't have to be exceptional or have any special language ability to become bilingual; as long as the child is exposed to two languages throughout early childhood, he or she will acquire them both.

Some people worry that learning more than one language is bad for a child, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, there are a lot of advantages to knowing more than one language. First, many linguists feel that knowing a second language actually benefits a child's cognitive development. Second, if the child comes from a family that has recently immigrated to the U.S., the family may speak a language other than English at home and may still have strong ties to their ethnic roots. In this case, being able to speak the language of the family's ethnic heritage may be important for the child's sense of cultural identity. To be unable to speak the family's language could make a child feel like an outsider within his or her own family; speaking the family's language gives the child a sense of identity and belonging. Third, in

an increasingly global marketplace, it's an advantage for anyone to know more than one language — regardless of whether one's family is new to the U.S. And finally, for people of any age or profession, knowing a second language encourages cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Does bilingualism in America threaten the English language?

English is in no danger of disappearing any time soon; it is firmly established both in America and in countries throughout the world. In fact, no language has ever held as strong a position in the world as English does today. Some people worry when they see Spanish showing up on billboards and pay phones, but in a neighborhood with a high Spanish-speaking population, it makes perfectly good sense for public information and instructions to be printed in both English and Spanish. This doesn't mean that the English language is in danger.

The truth is that there will probably always be immigrants in the U.S., coming from a wide variety of countries, who cannot speak English but whose grandchildren and great-grandchildren will end up being native English speakers. The reason for this is, again, the fact that it is much easier for children to learn another language than it is for adults. Adults who immigrate to the U.S., especially later in life, may never really become fluent in English. It's not that they don't want to speak English; it's simply much more difficult for them to learn it well. Their children, however, will be able to pick up English easily from their friends and the society around them. These second-generation immigrants, the children of the adult immigrants, are likely to be bilingual, speaking their parents' language at home and English at school and in the English-speaking community. When they grow up and have children of their own, those children — the third generation — will most likely speak only English, both at home with their bilingual parents and in the English-speaking community. This three-generation pattern has been repeating itself for many years, through wave after wave of immigrants. Many adults today who speak only English can remember